

The grass on my side of the fence

by
John Eidson

It was 1964, my junior year as an electrical engineering student at Georgia Tech. At 5' 10", my weight had plummeted to 100 pounds. In constant pain, I began passing frightening quantities of blood. The illness within appeared well on its way to destroying me, both physically and mentally. Crohn's disease can do that. I had been diagnosed four years earlier at William Beaumont Army Hospital in El Paso, Texas.

The worst flare-up in my brief history with Crohn's had sapped my ability to study. I managed to survive academically, but only because of overly generous grades passed out by compassionate professors who knew how sick I was. Embittered at my plight, I was obsessed with *Why me?*, a question that's futile to ask because it has no answer. I enviously saw my friends at school, and indeed people my age everywhere, as being on the other side of a fence where the grass was always greener.

As a military dependent with Air Force parents half a world away in Okinawa, I withdrew from school over Christmas break and threw myself on the mercy of the small medical facility at Fort McPherson in Atlanta. Accompanied by a full-blown case of self-pity, I checked into the clinic convinced that my best days were far behind, never to return.

With limited facilities and a patient badly in need of help, the doctor at Fort Mac transferred me to Walter Reed, the big gun of military hospitals. Shortly after arriving, I was taken to an auditorium, where I was seated on the stage in a fold-up metal chair. Positioned in front of me were members of Walter Reed's 'belly conference', a group of a dozen or so physicians who combined their expertise to develop battle plans for the most serious cases of gastrointestinal illness. Alone and frightened, I answered occasional questions as the doctors and surgeons talked above my head in a debate to determine the prescription for my immediate medical future.

While awaiting the verdict of the belly conference, the young officer assigned as my primary physician felt a change of scenery might be good for me, and he issued authorization for me to have my meals in the hospital mess hall, rather than in my bed. For that seemingly insignificant decision, I am forever indebted to you, Lt. Yutzy. Although neither of us could have anticipated it at the time, that decision of yours would soon result in a dramatic reversal of my declining fortunes.

As I picked half-heartedly at the food on my plate during the first meal away from my room, the moment that would profoundly change my life was literally just around the corner. A strange sound was coming from a hallway leading to the dining area. I looked up and saw a line of pajama-clad patients hobbling in on crutches, amputees with one leg missing. Close behind were wheelchair patients with both legs gone, followed by triple amputees, and still more with grotesque facial wounds and other injuries too horrible to imagine. Not a draft dodger in their midst, those battle-scarred contemporaries of mine were among the escalating casualties of the war in Vietnam.

At my table in the middle of the room, I sat transfixed in virtual disbelief. Suddenly, as if by a bolt of lightning straight from the hand of God, I was hit with the revelation that my lot in life wasn't so bad, after all. In the inspirational presence of those who had sacrificed so much, I realized that no matter how bad my condition was, there would always be others far worse off. From that point forward, I would never again feel sorry for myself, not a single time. I still had Crohn's disease, but gone forever were the days of being saddled with the one of the most counter-productive afflictions of all: self-pity.

Over the next two weeks, I unexpectedly began to gain weight. Soon, I was back in Atlanta, having been discharged from Walter Reed in light of my rapidly improving condition. Not long after I had re-enrolled in school for spring quarter, my weight had soared to 144 pounds, twenty-five more than I had ever weighed. My illness had receded into what would become a major remission.

During my three weeks at Walter Reed, I received neither medication nor surgery. My only treatment -- an about-face change of attitude -- was entirely self-administered. Freed from the bitterness that had dominated my every waking moment, I was blessed with an unfailing commitment to never again look with envy at the grass on the other side of someone else's fence, grass that in many cases may not be green at all.

Over the years, my disease continued to bear its teeth from time to time. I would later experience the debilitating pain of more than sixty intestinal obstructions, and I eventually had a turn or two with the surgeon's knife. But since those hopeless days of long ago, I've gone on to live an unbelievably rewarding life, thanks to the chance encounter that occurred at Walter Reed over forty years ago.

Although I'm sure those courageous young men in the dining room were unaware of me, the brief time I spent in their presence affected me deeply. They had no way of knowing that the patriotic duty they performed on the killing fields of Vietnam would continue in the mess hall at Walter Reed, where, albeit unwittingly and in a very different way, they once again served their country by providing the inspiration that would forever change the life of a fellow citizen.

Since remissions do occur with Crohn's disease, there is no evidence that my dramatic improvement was in any way related to my equally dramatic change of attitude, just as there is none that the optimistic outlook I adopted way back then has had anything to do with the wonderful life I've enjoyed since. But until someone proves otherwise, that's exactly what I believe. For me, the grass on my side of the fence is whatever color I choose, and I decided long ago that its color would always be green.